

ISOLATION WARD

By Martine Bailey

SHARP SCRATCH
ISOLATION WARD

The logo consists of the lowercase letters 'aeb' in a white, elegant, cursive script. The letters are positioned above a thin, horizontal white line. This entire logo is centered within a solid black rectangular background.

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*To my dear sister, Lorraine,
after whom I named my heroine.*



CHAPTER ONE

Monday 26th September, 1983

The TV screen was filled with a vast towered and turreted building that might have been a Baroque palace. Yet at second glance, it was stained as black as soot by Yorkshire rain and creeping mould. The camera pulled back to reveal an asylum complex the size of a village: some of its roofs green with creeping moss, and a scattering of its high Gothic windows boarded up with plywood. Above it all soared an Italianate tower bearing a large pale-faced clock crowned with battlements of black-toothed stone.

The documentary's female presenter came into shot, huddled in a crimson coat and scarf, dwarfed by a monstrous arch topped with rampant stone beasts.

'The inquiry into the scandalous events at Windwell Asylum has delivered its findings. The only possible response is to close down this relic of the cruel Victorian past, and indeed the asylum's grim corridors and tunnels are scheduled to be destroyed. A modern top-security unit is in the process of being built close by, and the Secretary of

State with responsibility for health has assured Parliament that the team in charge will keep the most dangerous criminals in the country safe – and also keep us safe from them.’

‘Come on, love. Are you asleep?’

Lorraine Quick raised heavy eyelids to find her mum standing over her in her dressing gown, the television’s light flickering across her fine-boned face.

‘Yes. Sorry.’ Glancing towards the TV, she caught the final shot of a dilapidated mental asylum as *World in Action*’s jazzy organ theme music played out.

Blearily, she noticed the scattering of personality tests and overhead projector slides that surrounded her, and shoved them into her satchel. So much for preparing tomorrow’s session. Her newly created job as a specialist in Organisational Change was too busy and exciting to cram into a 9-to-5 day. Tomorrow morning she’d just have to busk her presentation. She switched off the TV and spread a sleeping bag and pillow along the settee. She couldn’t blame her mum for keeping her own bedroom, which she now shared with Lorraine’s eight-year-old daughter, Jasmine. Any day now, the housing association would surely write to her about a house in Salford’s redevelopment scheme.

Also waiting on the table were the school test booklets she had been coaching Jasmine to complete over the last few weeks. Jasmine was bright, but she wasn’t familiar with the types of questions used to win a junior scholarship to a grammar school. And if personality testing had taught Lorraine one thing, it was that familiarity with the questions’ format was a serious advantage in a test. Yawning, Lorraine

marked all the practice questions Jasmine had completed on arriving home from school. Tired out but satisfied with her daughter's improving performance, Lorraine settled down for a contented night's sleep.

Tuesday 27th September

The Lancashire Hospital Board met at 9 a.m. and Lorraine was waiting for them, her first slide ready in place on her portable overhead projector. It was a cold autumnal morning and her old Metro had been almost alone on the multi-lane M61 motorway. A grey dawn had been scarcely breaking, a mere glimmer through the rain, when she first arrived. She yawned and wished she could transform herself into a morning person. After all, she only needed to get through this final week's work before taking a whole two weeks' annual leave on the German tour with her band, Electra Complex.

An approaching flurry of footsteps rang out in the corridor. She took a steady breath and stood to greet her audience of hospital managers and begin her presentation. She gave a series of reasons why the hospital should take part in her project to use personality testing to help select staff. Mostly, they were self-evident: finding better-suited and more motivated employees, avoiding rogue applicants, reducing high turnover. This morning, only the hospital's general manager was resisting common sense, trying to find a reason not to take part. Former wing commander Frank Chichester was exactly the type of man Margaret Thatcher wanted in a top NHS job: an outsider from the RAF, gruff, tough, and to Lorraine's mind, pretty dense. He kept asking

her how his busy staff could find the time to waste on all this ‘rigmarole’. She stifled her honest thought, that if his staff were too busy to care about the calibre of who they employed, that had to be his fault.

She put up her final slide, which posed the question of cost to the hospital. The answer was that there was no cost, as Lorraine had managed to find a grant to fund the whole project. Even the no-nonsense medical director managed a smile in her direction, followed by a sly sideways glance at the wing commander.

‘I’m for it,’ said the chief nurse. ‘We need to recruit the best nurses at our first attempt.’

The personnel director spoke up next. ‘I’m in favour, too. Unsuitable staff cost us a fortune in re-advertising and retraining.’

They all waited for their boss’s response.

Suddenly outnumbered, he caved in and flapped an impatient back of his hand towards her. ‘Very well. Liaise with Personnel.’

After the room emptied, she packed her satchel, feeling buoyant. The title of her ‘Square Peg Project’ always gave her a secret frisson of pleasure. Its origin dated back to a conversation she’d had some six months earlier, with Detective Sergeant Diaz of the Greater Manchester Police. Under the immense pressure of a murder inquiry they had shared a fascination with psychological techniques, and one favour she had done for him was to test his own personality. Their profiles had proved to be uncannily similar: both intuitive introverts who loved working alone, both secretly ambitious and determined. But whereas she was open and rebellious, Diaz’s ambitions were fuelled by a disturbed

childhood and a profound mistrust of sharing his emotions. They had both agreed that they were square pegs in round holes, unsettled in their jobs, though there was more to it than that. From almost their first meeting she had felt an invisible bond between them, that sparked to life whenever they caught each other's eye or tuned into each other's thoughts. There had been that one glorious but disastrous night when they had curled body around body, talking in the candlelit darkness, opening up their raw, open selves. And then, almost before it had started, it had all turned sour. He had failed to tell her he was already committed to a fiancée named Shirley who was bearing his child.

Furious, she'd told him that it was over. And yet she had named her first crucial project after that conversation they'd shared. Square Peg had felt like a positive decision. Suddenly she laughed out loud. She hoped the symbolism wasn't some sort of sexual Freudian slip. Diaz, if he were here, would laugh at that idea of his having a 'square peg' trying to fit in a round hole. They hadn't ever had a chance to find out.

'Miss Quick?' The receptionist arrived with a phone message in hand. Dreading a calamity at Jasmine's school, she unfolded it: 'New appointment with Mr Morgan, North West Regional Director, at 4 p.m.'

No, no. That clashed with her afternoon presentation at the next hospital on her list. She would have to reschedule. Morgan truly was a selfish git. Still, no way could she ignore a summons from the man who had recently appointed her to this scary but impressive job. And she needn't worry – she had plenty of good news to give him.

* * *

The Regional Director of Personnel and Legal Services, to give him his full title, was nothing like the wing commander. Morgan was a former employment lawyer, a deeply introverted man of few words but all of significant weight. She was not offered refreshments. When she began to update him on the success of Square Peg, he lifted his palm to silence her.

‘That’s not why you’re here. You saw that exposé of Windwell Asylum last night?’

She nodded, though she had only glimpsed the last few seconds of footage.

‘You know that our health secretary is the ultimate overseer of this country’s special hospitals? Those institutions have a history of absolute failure in every way. This cannot continue. As you know, the old Windwell Asylum is being demolished and a modern top-security unit has just been built beside it. That’s the easy bit. The bricks and mortar – or should I say razor wire and steel.’ Morgan smiled, showing pointed little teeth. ‘The hard bit is getting human beings to properly direct what goes on inside those places. The new director, Doctor Voss, is having some issues with his team. Those issues need to be resolved. That’s where you come in.’

Lorraine struggled to hide her dismay. One thing she loved about working across the whole northern region was that she could move around freely, without feeling trapped inside an institution. And here was Morgan, trying to send her to one of the most oppressive hospitals in the country.

She could barely follow his words as he described the need for an expert to work with Windwell’s senior staff and miraculously transform them into a functioning team.

It wasn't a team-building expert they needed, it was a magician.

'As you're already on the payroll, there seemed no point in looking elsewhere. You'll be seconded for a month to work directly for Doctor Voss. We're depending on you to turn Windwell into a good news story.'

Seconded for a month? Jasmine's scholarship exam was booked for a week hence. And the German tour with the band started next week too.

'When is this, exactly?'

'We've arranged for you to report to Doctor Voss, first thing next Tuesday morning.'

'I'm sorry, I have two weeks' leave booked from next Monday.'

'Cancel it.'

'I can't. I have commitments in Germany.'

Morgan leant back in his leather executive chair and narrowed his eyes at her. 'You've been here two months already. All you've produced so far is a mediocre plan to improve selection. We're looking for positive headlines, big breakthroughs. Here's your chance. A national profile that proves that all this pseudoscience of yours actually works. Convince me to continue funding your job. Your contract is still probationary. I can end it tomorrow if I choose.'

Lorraine could produce no satisfactory response.

'Do I make myself clear?'

'Yes.' She was damned if she'd call him 'sir', like his other subordinates.

She turned around, and briskly left the room.